

[By Anne Galloway](#)

Congress' approval rating among American voters has been dismal for several years, but it hit a record low last August when Republicans in the House held the debt ceiling debate hostage and suggested radical cuts to fundamental safety net programs.

Only 11 percent to 13 percent of respondents think Congress is doing a good job; more than 80 percent of Americans surveyed by a variety of sources over the last three months disapprove of Congress' job performance.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., told business leaders at the Montpelier Rotary Club on Monday that he isn't surprised that Congress' behavior has undermined the public's confidence in government.

"Congress did an enormous amount of damage with America's confidence in itself with the way they handled that debt ceiling debate that in my view was a disaster," Welch said. "The premise of the whole debate was that it was actually optional whether we pay our bills. Can you imagine anyone in Vermont anyone at the statehouse, Republican or Democrat, legislator or governor, actually pretending whether we would pay the bills incurred by previous governors and previous legislators?"

Welch, a Democrat, is Vermont's sole congressman in the House of Representatives, and he's been a lone voice in the Washington wilderness. The congressman is a consensus builder who tries to create coalitions around contentious issues. He has, since the Tea Party took control of the House, been sounding the same theme: Republicans and Democrats need to find a way to work together on a variety of issues, from ending ethanol subsidies to managing the debt ceiling crisis.

Welch has been rewarded for what in the current toxic Washington environment have been extraordinary bipartisan efforts with an unusual amount of attention from the DC press corps, including The Hill and the Washington Post. Last week, Talking Points Memo and the New York Times lauded his call for an investigation into new credit card swipe charges imposed by the nation's four biggest banks. Welch asked the Department of Justice to conduct a probe of a

possible fee-fixing scheme.

"The top four banks have among them \$7.7 trillion dollars and they do provide some consumer lending but they also serve as tremendous trading platforms, buying and selling derivatives, currencies doing all these things associated with trading, which is fine, but it's different from consumer banking," Welch told the Rotarians.

This week Welch is leading the call to end ethanol subsidies and other oil industry supports. In a letter to the Super Committee, which is charged with finding \$1.5 billion in savings by Nov. 23, Welch said the move would save \$122 billion over the next 10 years. He is also suggesting that the federal government save \$156 billion by negotiating drug prices for seniors through a provision he calls the Medicare Part D Negotiation bill. The two measures would save \$280 billion or 19 percent of the total savings sought by the Super Committee over the next decade. Thirty-six House Democrats signed the letter.

Ethanol, he said, gets 45 cents a gallon in taxpayer subsidy, plus a 54 cent a gallon tariff and there is a federal mandate requiring U.S. companies to buy ethanol. The total cost to taxpayers? \$6 billion, Welch said. Republicans "get that" and agree with it, he said.

Just how much Welch and his compatriots on both sides of the aisle will achieve at a time when Congress has never been more fractious is an open question.

Legislation that would have easily passed in years past – for example funding for emergency relief funding for transportation infrastructure damaged by Tropical Irene – is up in the air. Welch describes his attempts to push for FEMA, transportation and farm money as a "challenge" for Vermont's three-man congressional delegation – even with a bipartisan coalition of 30 Democrats and 25 Republicans gunning for the funding.

Welch anticipates that the bickering, however, will likely go on as lawmakers figure out how to lower the long-term deficit. Democrats need to cut some entitlements, and Republicans need to accept some tax increases, he said.

"The challenge we have is actually solvable," Welch said. "This is the aspect that when I talk to folks really upsets them. We've got a long-term budget challenge that needs to get back into balance. Reasonable people know in order to get there we have to give and we have to take and it's going to take Democrats being willing to make some cuts and some Republicans being willing to raise some revenues and it's going to mean achieving the common goal of fiscal stability. Congress has to have some capacity to work together and make some decisions and give people some confidence that that institution, which is entrusted to make some of these decisions, will in fact make them."